

“Our RSVP to the Banquet”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 22: 1-14

When was the last time you sent out invitations for an event? It could have been a child’s birthday party, and you asked that people respond by a certain date, so you could plan for how many to expect. It could have been for a dinner you were hosting at your house, and you wanted people to respond so you knew how much food to cook, how many table settings you needed, and, depending on who responded, just how clean you had to get your house! It could have been for a major event, such as a wedding or anniversary or graduation, and you needed people to respond to your invitation so you had an idea of how much it would truly cost. Sending out invitations can be exciting and joyful, and it can be stressful and worrisome.

When was the last time you received an invitation, and were asked to RSVP? It could have been something as formal as linen paper in a hand-addressed envelope in the mail, or something as informal as a text message asking if you were free for lunch. It could have been from someone you have been longing to hear from, and you excitedly said, “Yes!” to the invitation. It could have been from someone you honestly dreaded to hear from, and you thought up an excuse as to why you were unable to accept the invitation. Receiving an invitation can be exciting and joyful, and it can be stressful and worrisome.

In the story we have read from Matthew today, Jesus tells of a king who threw a wedding banquet for his son and invited many. It was customary in those days for someone to send out a first invitation for a gathering, and then when things were ready, to send a servant to those invited and tell them that it is time to come. So, the master sends his servants out, and waits expectantly for them to return with all those whom he invited. But instead of people returning to his house for dinner, all the servants bring are excuses.

“But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them” (22:5-6). Not exactly the kind of RSVP the king had expected, huh? This infuriates the king, and he responds to the ungrateful invitees with harsh actions: “He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city” (22:7). So the king is left with a wedding banquet, ungrateful invited guests, and lots of food to eat. What’s a king to do?

“Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite

everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests” (22:8-10).

As we talked about last week, this parable is told during Holy Week, only a few days before Jesus is handed over to the authorities to be crucified. It follows the parable of the wicked tenants, which, as we discussed last Sunday, shows how the world rejected God through the human relationship embodied in Jesus. Now, here is another allegory of rejection, and how those who have been invited to the feast continually refuse the king’s invitation.

As one commentator notes: *In Matthew’s world, this parable was a reminder that God had initially invited the people of ancient Israel to be God’s people. God chose a people who had begun as nomadic wanderers and who ended up being slaves in Egypt for 430 years. God did so in order to use them as an example of how much God can bless and how high God can place any people who are willing to honor God’s will and God’s word above all else.*

When Christ appeared, the parable goes on to suggest, those who were invited to the king’s banquet failed to show up when the day for the big event finally arrived. In the preceding chapter of Matthew, Jesus rode into Jerusalem like a conquering king amid shouts of “Hosanna.” However, just five days later as Jesus stood on trial before Pontius Pilate, the people in that same city cried out, “Crucify him!” (Matt. 27:22) The time had come. The Messiah had entered the ancient city, but in the end the people of Jerusalem did not accept God’s invitation.

When the king’s first invited guests refused his invitation, he did what many coaches on sports teams will do; he shifted the lineup that was on the field. When a coach believes that the players in the game at any moment have lost their energy or their focus or their desire to win, the coach does not just concede the game to the other team. The coach is more likely to bench those who were playing and put somebody else in the game instead. God has the authority to bench those who refuse to answer God’s invitation for service. (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 165-169).

This image of a coach benching players and calling-up new players is reinforced by the end of the parable. For even when those guests – “both good and bad” – are seated for the wedding banquet, the king still has expectations of them. Upon noticing that one man was not wearing a wedding robe, “the king said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’” (22:12-13).

While this parable also occurs in Luke, only this addendum appears in Matthew. Many have interpreted the second group of invited guests as the church, and for Matthew, that means that just because you have been accepted into the wedding banquet does not mean you no longer are beyond reproach. "The error of the unrobed wedding guest involves fruitfulness. The unrobed guest does not show the fruits of living as a guest at the banquet of grace. His downfall comes in the moment when, asked by the host to account for the way he appears, he has nothing to say" (Richard Spalding, *ibid*, 168).

Where are we amid this parable? How do we view our place in the story? Do we believe we turn our backs on the king's invitation, on God's invitation? Or do we feel we could never reject God? Where are we amid this parable? I appreciated these thoughts from Elton Richards as I considered how this parable speaks to us today:

How easy it is for us with our very busy schedules to regard or disregard an unsolicited invitation as an intrusion. In an age of consumerism we hear more about rights than privileges. We control our choices. No one has a claim on us unless it is our choice. When God says, "Seek ye first" we respond with "Let me first."

Those invited make light of the call to come to the banquet. We read one went to his farm, another to his business. There is no hint of either engaging in unsavory activities. These are responsible, busy people in the everyday working world. They are simply so consumed with the "dailyness" of their tightly prescribed schedules that nothing can break through – even God can wait.

Christians make a grave mistake when they think their only choices in life are between good and evil. In the parable of the Pearls, also in Matthew, the merchant sells his good pearls for the Supreme Pearl. The choice is never between pearl and mud. It is between this pearl and that pearl. Sometimes the good we have becomes the enemy of the best we might enjoy. The servants may well have been doing good things on the farm and at the business, but in their busyness they missed the banquet. If one is full, an invitation to a feast is not good news. No wonder Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount – "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness sake, for they shall be satisfied." Those whose stomachs and schedules are satiated cannot experience a spiritual hunger for the kingdom (Elton Richards, "Sorry, I'm Busy," http://day1.org/878-sorry_im_busy).

The king has invited us to the wedding banquet. Whether it's the first group of invitees, or the second group brought in off the street, we have been extended the invitation by our God. How do we respond? How will we respond? What will be our RSVP to our Lord?

The fact of the matter is we have already made our RSVP to the banquet. We have already given God our response to his invitation. It is not in the form of a letter or phone call. It is not in the form of an

email or a text message. It is not by knowing a particular passage of scripture or reciting a specific creed. No, none of those are our RSVP to the banquet. Do you know what it is? I will show you.

(Walk over to the baptismal font, take off the cover, and reveal water in the baptismal bowl.)

These waters of baptism are our RSVP to God's invitation to the banquet. It makes no difference whether these waters flowed over our heads, immersed our entire bodies, sprinkled on top of our hair, or touched us as an adult, a youth, or an infant. When we were baptized into the Body of Christ, we replied to God's invitation with a resounding, "Yes!" We told the king, "We'll be at the banquet, and we will live every day of our lives thankful for our place at the table."

So, when we agree to serve, to help, to take part in an important ministry, then start thinking, "Let me first," remember these waters, and remember your RSVP.

When we are asked to serve in leadership, to bring to the table the gifts God has given us, but we start thinking, "Let me first," remember these waters, and remember your RSVP.

When we are asked to consider how the choices we make regarding money reflect our faith, but we start thinking, "Let me first," remember these waters, and remember your RSVP.

And if you have not given your RSVP through these waters of baptism, what is holding you back from replying to God's invitation? For while many are called and few are chosen, we are indeed chosen when we allow these waters to envelope us with God's grace.

The invitation has been extended. The king is waiting. Act on the RSVP you have given him through these baptismal waters.

Thanks be to God. Amen.